

Dear Friend

As I sit down to write this, it is just after 9.00am on this most solemn day in the Church's year - Good Friday. The third hour - 9 o'clock in the morning - is when Jesus was crucified; the agony of the cross would last for the next six hours. For God, who exists beyond time, this moment had always, and will always exist. Revelation 8.13 describes Jesus as: The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. A concept surely impossible for us to fully grasp - had Jesus been suffering throughout human history? Is he still suffering today? This cannot be right, as at the end, Jesus was able to say in triumph: "It is finished" or "It is accomplished". I believe the phrase 'The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world' means that this day - Good Friday - had been planned by God from before time began, as the only way that he could bring salvation to his fallen creation.



The hymn that has accompanied me in my own personal journey through Holy Week is 'There is a green hill', which says "We may not know, we cannot tell, what pains He had to bear". No one can fully comprehend what Jesus endured through the six hours of his crucifixion. Although we know that he would rise again on the third day, none of his friends, family or followers had any such knowledge from which to draw some crumb of comfort. Today, we need to linger at the cross, to see it as those present, who loved him, saw it: the end of a beautiful life, the extinguishing of all hope, the darkest of all days. How could this be? How could the one who claimed to be the Messiah - the Saviour of Israel, be hanging helpless on a cross? Everyone who knew about these things believed that when the Messiah - the Christ, the anointed one - appeared, that all the promises of God regarding the restoration of Israel would be fulfilled. So if Jesus truly was the Chosen One, then he, together with those promises, had failed. God had failed. This was unthinkable, so the only other possibility was that this man was not the Messiah. No wonder then, that the crowd, who had welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem just a few days before with cries of "Hosanna to the Son of David", now hurled insults at him: "Come down now from the cross, if you are the Son of God!" (Matthew 27.40b) Notice the echo of the temptations in the wilderness.

Jesus' followers, though, in bewilderment and fear, had deserted him and fled after he was arrested in Gethsemane. At least John returned with the four women who were closest to Jesus (John 19.25-27). They could not possibly comprehend that this was part of God's perfect plan - that he would give his only Son that we may not perish, but may have eternal life. So the cross reveals the full extent of God's love for the world, and as

we hear the final words that Jesus spoke as he "hung and suffered there", believing as we do that this was "for us", we can hear words of love:

To the soldiers as they pierced his hands and feet: "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do" (Luke 23.34) The "them" in this saying refers to everyone who acts in ignorance when they take his precious name on their lips as a swear word, as well as to all of us when we act in ignorance or stupidity -when we 'don't know what we are doing'.

To the penitent thief when he said to Jesus, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom", and Jesus answers with these wonderful words, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." So many are dying today in ignorance of God's love and fearing for an unknown future; as they are touched by loving but gloved hands and see caring eyes through protective visors, they too need to know that they will be with Jesus in paradise.

To John, the beloved disciple, and Mary, his beloved mother, "Woman, here is your son ... here is your mother". (John 19.26-27) Throughout the scriptures, our Father has a deep concern for the orphan and the widow, the outcast and the stranger, a concern that results in practical help towards his beloved mother.

In order to fulfil the scripture: "I am thirsty" (John 19.28). The scripture Jesus has in mind is Psalm 69.21: 'They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst.' The 'scriptures' are of course what we know as the Old Testament, however a better title would be: The First Covenant. God's agreement with his people Israel to be with, protect, lead, guide, keep, feed, bless and forgive his people - the promises that in his Son, find their perfect fulfilment; as Paul says 'For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ. And so through him the 'Amen' is spoken by us to the glory of God.' 2 Corinthians 1.20.

Immediately after Jesus had received the vinegar he said, "It is finished" (John 19.30). The work of salvation, of offering forgiveness and peace, through grace and truth, was finally accomplished, as Christ took his final breaths.

'He died that we might be forgiven,  
he died to make us good,  
that we might go at last to heaven,  
saved by his precious blood.'

At the end of it all: 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' (which means 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?') (Matthew 27.46; Mark 15.34) Words taken from Psalm 22 v. 1. This Psalm gives us a glimpse into Jesus' pain, which together with Isaiah 53, are the key 'First Covenant' passages prophesying the suffering that the servant of God would endure. This moment of utter dereliction stands out as the only time Jesus is concerned for

himself. All the other words are focussed on those around him - the soldiers, the thief, his family and friends. Here we see the real cost of our sin - that the only begotten beloved Son of the Father, in whom dwells all the fullness of God, with whom God is well pleased - takes upon and into himself the curse of sin, which is separation from God, not just physical death, but forsakenness and abandonment.

Finally, "Into your hands, O Lord, I commit my spirit" (Luke 23.46) Jesus' faith and trust is undimmed, he has endured where human flesh had failed. He had accomplished what no human being could accomplish. He had triumphed and now there awaited him the crown of life and glory at the Father's right hand. But not quite yet. Let us remain at the cross, focussing not on Jesus' pain, but on his love. Let us see him looking upon us with his all-seeing, all-knowing, all-loving gaze, and know that he died on this day for all of us - for you. That he loves you, and always will, now and in eternity.

May the knowledge of his love bring you deep peace, now and always. Amen.

Simon